Note from LMB: these short essays were written in promotional support for the initial launch of *The Sharing Knife*, my fantasy tetrology from Eos/HarperCollins, now complete. The 5-post series starts here:
http://outofthiseos.typepad.com/blog/2006/10/post_one_or_why.html

Five Short Essays Originally posted on the Eos Blog, Oct. 2006

Post One, Or, why I have no out-takes

It was suggested that among things of interest to readers I might post in my week of guest blogging would be out-takes, discarded bits and pieces of the recent book that would show my writing process at work. Now, there are as many processes as there are writers, but mine doesn't leave much on the cutting room floor readable by any eyes other than mine (and sometimes not even by mine–what word *was* that penciled squiggle intended to be...?), because most of my structural revision takes place at the outline stage, which is ornate and multi-layered, more resembling thinking out loud on paper than anything else. After the first draft goes onto the page, revisions, for me, tend to be a line here, a paragraph there, partial re-tooling of a scene, but very seldom wholesale slaughter of bad ideas that didn't grind to a halt quite fast enough. This is not only because my prose sets up like concrete and I have to revise with a jackhammer, and I hates it, Precious, although there's an element of that, too.

I do not outline in the sense of sitting down one day and sketching out the whole novel entire. My head would explode. I keep notes, in pencil in a three-ring binder, as much as a memory aid as anything, and they are quite disorganized, being mainly jottings of things as they occur to me–notes on the characters, setting, plot, research, whatever. I collect these over days and weeks, write a scene or a chapter, and then go back to the pre-writing brooding; lather, rinse, repeat–a rolling outline, in other words. A certain number of the Things That Won't Work get identified and jettisoned at this stage, as I push them around on the page with my pencil and look at them.

I find making it up and writing it down to be two distinct phases for me, with different head-zones. Creation happens most readily when I'm relaxed, or doing something that takes little attention–taking a walk, doing routine chores. The writing part is more intense and concentrated, but at the stage where I finally sit down at the computer, it's more like transcribing the outline (which is messy, in

pencil on lined notebook paper, with things crossed out and lines and arrows all over it), heavily editing on the fly. I hold each short unit, usually a scene, in my head till I have it pinned to the page. Only then is room left in my head to assemble the next bit.

The other reason I have few discarded passages is what I've come to dub "Writer's block–your friend." This is not real writer's block, which is a species of depression that can be very debilitating and long-lasting, but more like "being stuck for a bit." Sometimes, very confusingly to myself, I'll even have a partial outline of the proposed next section that looks quite convincing, but whatever it is in the back of my brain that occasionally deigns to disgorge prose refuses to engage. Once I've eliminated all the other possibilities–external distractions, letting my health-and-fitness routine lapse, whatever–I not-infrequently find I was trying to write the wrong thing. Wrong viewpoint, wrong turn of events, something that, when I look back from the end of the novel, is clear in retrospect (but not at the time) as something that would have shifted the book in a whole 'nother direction. I've learned to listen to my own creative silences; sometimes, they're trying to tell me something important. Like, "Don't do that, it's wrong."

I have an example of this not from *Beguilement*, but from its second half, *Legacy*, due out next June. Simplifying to avoid spoilers, at one point I had thought my hero Dag's grandfather was going to be a major character, and had sketched out quite a bit about him and the part I intended him to play, in notes. Dead halt, when I came to the scene where he would have been introduced. I even had it outlined. It took me, as I recall, some days or weeks of fretting to realize he didn't belong in the book at all, and the part I had intended him to play was much better carried out by another character. Rather a lot of notebook paper got big Xs drawn across them at that point. Poor fellow, slain before he even made it to the first draft.

Post Two, "Where do you get your ideas...?"

This is an unanswerable question that, upon sufficient repetition, makes many writers start gritting their teeth. "Where did you get the ideas for *this* book?" however, narrows it to something actually manageable, although the answer more reasonably takes the form of "Where I got *some* of the ideas for this book..."

In the case of *The Sharing Knife*, the question actually does have an answer. I got the initial idea out on my back deck, on a fine summer day in June of 2004. I had lately sent the submission draft of *The Hallowed Hunt* off to my editor at Eos, and was enjoying a sort of blank space while waiting for revision requests to come back on the tide, and so was officially off-duty for writing. I had been feeling especially dead-brained, as I tend to after finishing a novel, when the idea of even looking at more prose, let alone writing any, makes me faintly nauseated. But it was a beautiful sunny warm day in Minnesota, which is not a gift to be wasted, so I went outside to soak up the sun and not be anyone at all for a few hours.

(That turn of phrase, by the way, comes from the play *Arsenic and Old Lace*, when the dotty aunts try to persuade the crazy cousin to be some other president than Teddy Roosevelt, just for a change, "But he stayed under the bed all day and wouldn't be anyone at all!" I have days I feel like that.)

Anyway, I started thinking up a tale to entertain just myself, with no considerations of commercial viability or even artistic merit. Just stuff ***I*** liked. And, rather to my own surprise, my imagination started working again, spinning out this unlikely romance. This first version had little resemblance to the final, although Dag was even then a one-handed older soldier, and Fawn was a young, short, and troubled runaway. Their world and the sharing knives were not even a gleam in my eye yet. And a couple of happy hours went by, I absorbed my dose of needed sunlight (I don't think I have seasonal affective disorder, but I do like my light), and that was that.

As is not unusual, I found myself explaining the tale to my friend Pat as we went off to dinner, and all the reasons I couldn't make it a real novel, even though I'd enjoyed it immensely. I mean, writers are supposed to enjoy their work, but surely not this much? And she said–shortened considerably–"Of course you could." And I started thinking about it. And sure enough, she was right. (She often is.)

There followed about two months of intense world-building around my characters and their plot. A lot of fantasy writers start with their world, and then make up their characters and story so as to explore it; I more typically assemble it all in reverse. My worlds are created as the characters and story move through them, and don't

pre-exist in huge detail. (The plot is often very malleable as well, which means that at some phases things are shifting and mutating all over the place. Which makes me rather nervous to sell a book on proposal, because what if the book turns out to be something altogether else than what the publisher thought it was paying for?) But some things have to be settled before a tale can even begin.

My first key world-building invention was the malices, or blight bogles as my book's farmers dub them. They had two sources; one was a meditation, on one of my walks, about the sad lack of Dark Lords in my tales to date, and about the nature of such beings leading to fantasy novel (or trilogy) scenarios of a War to End Wars, which is not how the world in my observation operates; it's really just one damn war after another. And the other was being writer guest at Balticon in June of 2004, when they were having the seventeen-year cicada outbreak. Big gaudy bewildered insects raining down from the sky like sleet... which triggered, at length, the notion of a fantasy war that constantly hatches anew, just like the real ones. The next key invention was of course the malice-slaying sharing knives, which are a sort of canned human sacrifice, and then the culture that had to exist to support them. The notion of the knives came first; I more or less reasoned backward to many other aspects of the Lakewalkers.

And the opening scene presented itself to my mind's eye, and I was off. Although not running, but walking; a lot of the story development took place during my extended walks in local parks. I'd been trying to increase my exercise to fight the effects of middle age on my fasting blood sugar; I hadn't expected it to also increase my writing productivity, but it did.

Post Three. Which continues from thoughts stirred up by yesterday's post.

Another place *The Sharing Knife* came from was out of reaction to prior book projects of mine, most immediately *The Hallowed Hunt*, but also others.

Now, *The Hallowed Hunt* had started out, in its original conception, to be mainly a romance. But the book was hijacked from the heroine by the antagonist and carted off in another direction altogether. (You do understand by now that I make up a lot of this stuff as I go along.)

This turn of events also happened in part because of my early decision to make *HH* single viewpoint to its hero Ingrey, rather than splitting the viewpoint between Ingrey and heroine Ijada or making it multiple viewpoint. My point-of-view characters have a distressingly strong tendency to wrap the developing plot around their own concerns, and so of all the early structural decisions I make, who gets the viewpoint–whose head the story is shown through and in–has the most profound impact on the ultimate story shape. If Ijada had owned a viewpoint, Earl Horseriver would have found the story much harder to take away from her.

Some wag once remarked that literary fiction is about love and death, and genre fiction is about sex and violence. (***Snrch***, I say, which is a useful internet phrase indicating a snigger.) When the most important relationship in the book turned out to be not between the hero and the heroine, but between the hero and the villain, the book became a lot more about death and a lot less about love than I'd originally planned. (And we never even got to the sex, drat it.)

Which led me to wonder in turn if that's one of the salient differences between men's adventure fiction and women's romance fiction. In an adventure tale, the most important relationship is between the hero/ine and the villain (or antagonist, in the case of villain-less conflicts such as man-against-nature); in a romance, the most important relationship is between the heroine and the hero. Combining the two story types can lead to a sort of hierarchy-of-values problem. If two characters struggling for their very lives stop in the middle to smooch, it risks looking not romantic, but stupid. And villains have their ways of insisting that everyone pay attention to *them*. So in all my prior adventure tales, the romance, often my favorite aspect, inevitably ended up relegated to a mere sub-plot. Was it structurally possible to write an intelligent fantasy-adventure in which the romance stayed central?

The Sharing Knife was, in part, my attempt to find out. Some very interesting–to me, at least–things happened to the two structures when blended; a lot of important events don't occur at quite the places where experienced readers of either genre expect them to, for one. Due to the place where the long tale was split into two volumes, the mid-book breather of the whole arc is doubling for the climax of the first volume, *Beguilement*. That it's a sufficiently lively breather to do so says something.

And some of the quietest scenes will have the most important consequences; I could tell even when I was first writing them, before I ever knew how the rest of the book would play out, when it all went "myffic, with extra myff," as Nanny Ogg from Terry Pratchett's Discworld books once said. "One spins the thread, one measures it, and one cuts it off." Ah. Oh.

None of these observations were available to me in advance, mind you, only in retrospect. When I'm writing, mostly what's out ahead is murk. My structure and pacing happen mainly by gut-feel. I have to write my way into the light, sentence by sentence and scene by scene, and just hope it will all add up to something worth a reader's money and time by the end.

The second half, *Legacy*, starts at a rather unexpected place too; it's not meant to be read as a stand-alone, but inevitably some readers will–although enough about the prior events get rounded up in the first three or four chapters that I think they won't sink. I'll be fascinated by the reader-response from that group. But that's looking ahead (to June 2007, to be exact, when *Legacy* will be published with the other half of the gorgeous cover art by Julie Bell. http://www.dendarii.co.uk/Covers/American/knife.html for a sneak peek.)

Post Four, Music hath charms

Like many other writers, I sometimes find that music supplies inspiration for work in progress, either triggering ideas, or coming along to support them. At one time or another all sorts of music has worked this way for me–instrumental, classical, rock, folk–an old Steeleye Span song, "King Henry and the Grisley Ghost," updated to SFnal terms, once supplied a character and entire subplot for a novella.

Thinking back, there are several songs that triggered ideas for Dag and Fawn, or supplied as it were theme songs or anthems for them, that somehow (in my mind, likely in my mind alone) seemed deeply associated with their salient characteristics or emotions. Dag, being at times an angsty sort of fellow, especially seemed to attach himself to music, and music and singing do feature, if briefly (but pivotally) in *Beguilement*.

One of the first songs to attach itself to Dag was by a now defunct group (but it has descendants) called October Project, and titled "Paths of Desire." Along about the same time, I belatedly discovered the work of the late Dave Carter with Tracy Grammer, who supplied not only some wonderful songs, but very American voices that somehow tied in with my tale. From their album *Tanglewood Tree* I found songs for each of my protagonists, "Tanglewood Tree" for Dag and "The Mountain" for Fawn, and from *When I Go*, yet another for Dag, a natural titled "Annie's Lover." Dag seems to have the lion's share, here, but that may be deceptive, since "The Mountain" is such a powerful song.

If ever *The Sharing Knife* becomes an audio book, I'm going to send the narrator to listen to Dave and Tracy, to get the cadence of the voices for my duo. Dag's voice is deeper than the singer's, but it still has that Western-Midwestern drawl to it.

I don't, be it noted, listen to music while I'm actually writing; I need silence for that. My brain doesn't multi-task especially well. Music is a sporadic interest. At some times I'll be open and actively searching out new stuff. At others I'll be shut down for weeks on end, as I also shut off movies and other books, while I'm listening to–or for–my own inner voice.

I should also mention I have no musical talent myself, and could not carry a tune in a bucket. I am happily dependent on other artists to bring it to me. Seems fair.

Post Five, Landscapes in Fantasy... and Reality

More than in any other book I've ever written, its landscapes are important to *The Sharing Knife*. Patricia McKillip says she regularly starts with landscape–they're like the emotional music of the book for her–but for me, that was a bit of a departure (as are many other aspects of *TSK*). Because with *TSK*, I'm mining down to some of the deepest layers of my own experience: the farms, woods, lakes, rivers, animals, plants, insects, people, and weather of my Ohio childhood.

Tolkien and Pratchett are two other writers who, notably, have come the long way around to get home: the landscapes of Tolkien's own late nineteenth century childhood informing aspects of his tales, Pratchett most recently with the Chalk, home turf of Tiffany Aching and himself. And not just home ground: it's the lost place, the refuge of distant memory.

Like so many other Americans, for me that vanished landscape is engulfed by various sorts of change or urban sprawl, and is now recoverable only in the mind, as inaccessible to daylight reach as any faerie realm. My childhood has been paved. Many of its people are dead. The land has gone to the use of other more present lives, and no ghosts dwell there for them, nor even guesses of what went before. It's not an American experience only, to be sure, but it's an immensely common one for us. And the world of *The Sharing Knife* is a deliberately American landscape, not only physically but socially: no kings, no lords, no gods, no state religion, bottom-up rather than top-down political structures, all very much under local control.

One of the members of my chat list, Ohio librarian Mary Piero Carey, is from my home region, and she wrote in response to *Beguilement*:

"I have this landscape in my bones, and Lois, you NAILED it. The heat, the trees, the critters, the way the roads run, the Amish/German influenced farming community food. For those of you who don't live around here, yes, indeedy, this what our neck of the woods feels like. Lots of Indiana and Illinois is very like this as well. The pride and delight in early industrial achievements amongst the glass and brick makers in S.E. Ohio. (You just can't imagine the utter GLEE involved unless you read some of the early glass and brick industry history, especially once they figured out how to do it with natural gas.) The deep preoccupation of the farming mindset with LAND. The nearly simultaneous stupidity and brilliance of horses..."

This is not to encourage a sort of Easter-egg hunt for one-to-one correspondences between Oleana or Raintree and some road map of Midwestern states so beloved of a certain type of mind. (Well, unless

you find it a fun party game, in which case, go ahead, but don't look to me to keep score.) The correspondences run to a different fit, because the geography of the book is ultimately an internal one.

Welcome to my world.